

## Priorities for Protection

"Protection" means different things to different persons or agencies. "Protection" implies some form of conservation at a site, such that development and large-scale timber harvest are precluded in the foreseeable future. Sites in public ownership do not necessarily imply a protected status; a landfill or an airport owned by the county should not be considered as protected land. Likewise, flowing waters such as rivers and creeks are public waters "owned by the State of North Carolina", but they should not be considered as "protected" unless specific conservation measures, such as designation as an Outstanding Resource Water or a High Quality Water, have been enacted.

Normally, protection priorities in a county should start from the top down; thus, protection efforts should begin with Nationally significant sites, then State, then Regional, and then County sites. Nearly all of the Nationally significant sites are already in protected ownership, at the Sandhills Game Land and at Camp Mackall. However, only a portion of the Nationally significant McIntosh Bay Complex is protected, by TNC. The northeastern bay – Laurinburg Pond – has some protection as a Registered Natural Heritage Area, an agreement (to protect the natural area) between the landowner and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. However, this is not a permanent protection, and TNC owns just the extreme southeastern tip of this bay. TNC owns only the southeastern 45% of Big Cypress Meadow just south of Laurinburg Pond, most of 401 Bay east of US 401, and nearly all of the small Backside Bay. Of course, TNC has made efforts to acquire all tracts encompassing these four bays, but for various reasons only roughly 45-50% of all four bays collectively are protected. Because a private landowner could timber his portion of a bay, or could dig a drainage ditch across a bay rim and alter the water level in a bay, it is very important that these (and other) clay-based Carolina bays be held in conservation ownership. This ownership should not only include the wetlands within the bay but should extend onto surrounding uplands, as the amphibians that breed in the bay do not reside there all year. The bays are frequently dry in the warmer months, and some of the animals spend most of the year roosting and foraging in these uplands.

Whereas permanent protection of the remainder of the McIntosh Bay Complex may reside with TNC and not with other conservation entities, nearly all other sites needing protection are potentially available to a number of public and private agencies. Perhaps the most significant, completely unprotected site in the county is the State significant Green Pond Bay Rim. Most of the rim, and the associated Carolina bay (considered to be within a secondary boundary), lies in a single ownership. This site contains several rare plant populations, one of which is found nowhere else in the state, and the Sand Barren community there is one of the best examples in the state, as well.

The other State significant site essentially in unprotected status is the Upper Lumber River Swamp. However, as this area lies within the acquisition boundary of the Lumber River State Park, most efforts toward protecting these wetlands will reside with the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. However, this acquisition boundary extends to the South Carolina state line, and